

One cannot discount the importance of the compatibility issue.

☐ The Commission talked about the opportunity to "promote a common North American classification system which is user-friendly and effective", when it released Public Notice 1996-36.

☐ The Minister of Canadian Heritage - the Hon. Sheila Copps - remarked in May 1996 that "It's more important to have a harmonized system than it is to do it early."

☐ In our public opinion research, Canadians say they want compatibility, to lessen their confusion in using the ratings system along with the V-chip.

☐ Those who used the V-chip in their home for a month said they strongly support ratings systems that are the same or similar.

While the system that we are submitting to the Commission has tested very well, at the suggestion of the AGVOT Classification Committee, we plan on two minor changes. After having lived and worked with the system for a month, the programmers suggested modifying two of the rating designators - the nomenclatures. They propose that 'FAM' (Family) be changed to a 'G' (General), as it is more reflective of the broad range of programming which would fall under this rating and has a familiar connotation to most viewers. They also suggest changing 'PA' (Parental Advisory) to 'PG' (Parental Guidance), as this term is well known to parents through the movie ratings. Any changes would be only to the nomenclature, and not to the violence content guidelines and descriptors.

We are continuing to work on solving the technology issues, and on harmonization of the three Canadian systems. Our technical experts acknowledge it will be problematic if Canada maintains 3 to 4 different rating systems, as it is highly unlikely that all these systems can be accommodated in V-chip equipped television sets - the clear preference for consumers.

Canadian programming services and cable companies have demonstrated, by means of the considerable resources and effort they have expended on developing the rating system and the new generation of V-chip technology, that they accept their responsibilities towards Canada's children.

We respectfully request the Commission approve the Canadian Television Rating System for violence, which is clearly supported by solid public opinion research. This is the beginning of a new dialogue with viewers. It is another principal element of the Canadian approach to violence on television; an approach that is unequalled in the world.

We also wish to continue the positive, co-operative approach regarding a timetable for implementation that will best meet the public's needs, and ensure a successful introduction of this new instrument to protect children.

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A V-CHIP TUG-OF-WAR: Is Canada's new ratings system a concession to U.S. pressures?
Marci McDonald

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Onstage at the Academy Awards last month, he cut a diminutive figure, dwarfed by his co-presenter, Kristin Scott Thomas of The English Patient. But behind the scenes, Jack Valenti, Hollywood's dapper lobbyist in Washington, casts a shadow that is indisputably giant-sized. Now, nearly a decade after Valenti's wheeling and dealing scuttled Canadian legislation to boost the domestic film industry, his shadow has fallen across the country's television screens. This week, as a private broadcasting committee takes the wraps off a new TV rating system to help parents program the V-chip--the B.C. invention designed to block offensive programming, scheduled to be available by next fall--Valenti's deft backstage manoeuvring is being blamed for killing a groundbreaking set of Canadian guidelines.

Successfully tested in five cities last year, those guidelines graded shows according to both age-appropriateness and five levels of violent, sexual and language content. But despite an endorsement from three-quarters of the 100 households involved, the Action Group on Violence on Television turned its back on that proposed system. Instead, in a curiously secretive process culminating in a report due to go to federal regulators on April 30, AGVOT has opted for a watered-down scheme based largely on the vaguer, age-based ratings that Valenti rushed to American TV screens on Jan. 1 in an attempt to pre-empt more stringent government controls. AGVOT chairwoman Trina McQueen, president of the Discovery Channel, insists that the committee's decision was provoked neither by pressure from Valenti nor by his fabled Texas charm. "What we're developing is a system for busy people," she says. "We hope and we believe our system should not be largely different than the American system.

But for V-chip inventor Tim Collings, who teaches electrical engineering at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., and has been closely involved in developing a content-based system over the past three years, the proposal comes as a blow. "It's like being hit by a locomotive," he says. "Here is a technology a lot of people are really proud of, yet when you look at how it's been rolled out, we've either missed the point or we've been pressured. We could have carried the torch on this one. Isn't it all typically Canadian?"

Paradoxically, AGVOT is bowing to Valenti's lead at the very moment the American system is under assault from U.S. parent-teacher and mental health groups. Borrowed almost directly from the age-based movie ratings adopted by Hollywood 29 years ago, it is currently under review by the Federal Communications Commission. The system is prompting such a public outcry that Valenti has already been forced to tone down his rhetoric: unveiling the scheme last December, he had warned that, if the FCC attempted changes, "we'll be in court in a nanosecond." Now, industry insiders predict revised American guidelines will emerge this summer. David Moulton, chief of staff for Massachusetts Representative Edward Markey, who has championed the V-chip in Washington, agrees: "The irony is that, just as Canada is forced to conform to what the industry down here is trying to stuff down everybody's throats, the Americans may do a 180-degree turn on them."

The Canadian ratings, unlike the American, will operate exclusively with the V-chip --ready for programming into the slim black set-top boxes that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission has ordered to be available by September. In contrast, a U.S. telecommunications bill requires only that the V-chip appear in any TV sets built after February, 1998. The CRTC has yet to determine whether Canadian cable companies will lease or sell the boxes--and for how much. As critics point out, the estimated \$1- to \$2-a-month rental may discourage the poorest, most time-pressed families. Says Kealy Wilkinson, national director of the Toronto-based Alliance for Children and Television: "The parents who are least around to monitor what kids are watching are probably the ones who will be least able to afford it."

The CRTC must decide whether, as in the American system, parental advisories will appear in the form of tiny icons that flash on the screen for the first 15 seconds of every show. U.S. critics submit that the icons are useless unless parents happen to be in the room. And one month after the system debuted, a study by the Pew Media Research Center reported that 54 per cent of U.S. households had not noticed its existence.

Meanwhile, University of Wisconsin communications professor Joanne Cantor cautions that age-based warnings have "a forbidden fruit effect. Ratings that urge parental control based on age considerations make restricted programs more attractive."

Other groups have protested the fact that more than 60 per cent of U.S. programming--some fairly violent--has been labeled PG-parental guidance. Says Kathryn Montgomery of Washington's Centre for Media Education: "PG has become this big black hole into which everything falls." But McQueen blames that on how U.S. producers have labeled their wares: "If there is a failure, it's not in the system; it's how they implement it."

The Canadian guidelines will centre on violence, not sex scenes or lewd language. But McQueen argues that was all the CRTC required. And she points out that Canadians have two safeguards that Americans lack: a 1993 voluntary code of conduct whereby broadcasters agreed to refrain from showing excess violence before 9 p.m., and a broadcast standards council to which viewers can bring complaints.

But when Valenti protests that grading programs according to the intensity of their violence or sex scenes would be too complicated for parents to cope with, Collings scoffs. All three tests of his V-chip technology have managed that feat to parental approval. "You can get more consensus on what constitutes brief nudity around the world," he says, "than on what's suitable for a 12-year-old everywhere in this country." According to Collings, the opposition of both U.S. and Canadian broadcasters to content-based ratings comes down to the bottom line. "If you supply more content information to parents," he contends, "they will in the end block out more programs." That, in turn, translates into lower ad rates. Says Collings, "It becomes a sticky issue."

Still, he did not realize how sticky--or political--when he first brought his V-chip technology to former CRTC chairman Keith Spicer six years ago. Now 35, and the father of three pint-sized viewers, aged 5 to one year, he jokes that "I started all this before I had kids, a TV or a clue." Late last fall, Valenti told the U.S. media that Collings's tests had proved so unwieldy, Canadians had jettisoned their content-based scheme--a mistruth McQueen was obliged to correct. But last March, a month after Valenti announced that the U.S. industry would come up with its own TV ratings, the CRTC mandated this country's broadcasters to do the same. Suddenly, Collings found himself frozen out from the last test. "It's frustrating," he says. "People are saying, 'Why are broadcasters designing the system? Isn't that like telling the fox to guard the henhouse?'"

Clearly, both sides in the U.S. debate have a stake in this week's decision. Douglas Frith, a former Liberal MP who, as president of the Canadian Motion Picture Distributors Association, has become Valenti's point man, concedes: "If we were to come up with a system that's not compatible with the U.S. system, it may give more impetus to the groups that have been opposed to Valenti."

Still, those with the greatest stake in the debate remain the children themselves. And some educational activists fear that both the V-chip and its guidelines could ultimately do more harm than good--giving parents a false sense of technological security as TV shows grow increasingly violent. Says Heather-Jane Robertson, director of professional development for the Canadian Teachers' Federation: "What we got was an industry-controlled solution that downloaded the responsibility onto parents."

But McQueen argues that, like the besieged U.S. ratings, the Canadian system "is not set in stone. It is the beginning of what we hope is a dialogue with viewers," she says, "about the kind of TV they want to see."

ILLUSTRATION

Photo: Ottawa children: age versus content ratings
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